

Letters

That Hughes Steam Car Keeps on Rolling Along

Yucca Valley

EDITOR:

Professor Daugherty's summary of the Burns and Lewis attempt to develop a steam car for Howard Hughes (*E&S*, March-April) is pretty darned good, considering that he wasn't directly involved and this all happened over 40 years ago. Since I was directly involved, I would like to add a few details.

The first full year on the project, 1926, actually was spent in Houston. The first year in Hollywood, 1927, was under the name "Burns and Lewis" (the Hughes passion for secrecy). Dun and Bradstreet broke that down; their clients demanded to know how these two young squirts could afford to buy all that machinery! The name was changed to Hughes Tool Company, but that led to confusion with the Los Angeles branch of the parent company. Finally, Hughes Development Company was chosen.

Lewis was manager, Burns chief engineer, and Mrs. Burns acted as part-time secretary.

When Lewis was assigned to Multicolor, he took Mrs. Burns with him. Burns continued to run the Development Company, building most of the film-processing equipment for Multicolor. After the Multicolor plant went into operation, Burns was brought in as research director.

In November 1931 Hughes brought in some Hollywood film laboratory people, and Lewis and Burns were swept out into a full-fledged depression. Mrs. Burns was kept on as purchasing agent and secretary to the new president and new general manager to show them what should be done. A few months later, Hughes let the whole operation go into receivership.

As for the steam car, the finished product was not satisfactory. We attempted to meet Howard's reported

requirements, and we failed. There are people today who have spent ten times as much as we did and had to give up. No discredit to them either. The immutability of nature's laws remains intact; the goals were impossible.

BRUCE BURNS, '19

Los Angeles

GENTLEMEN:

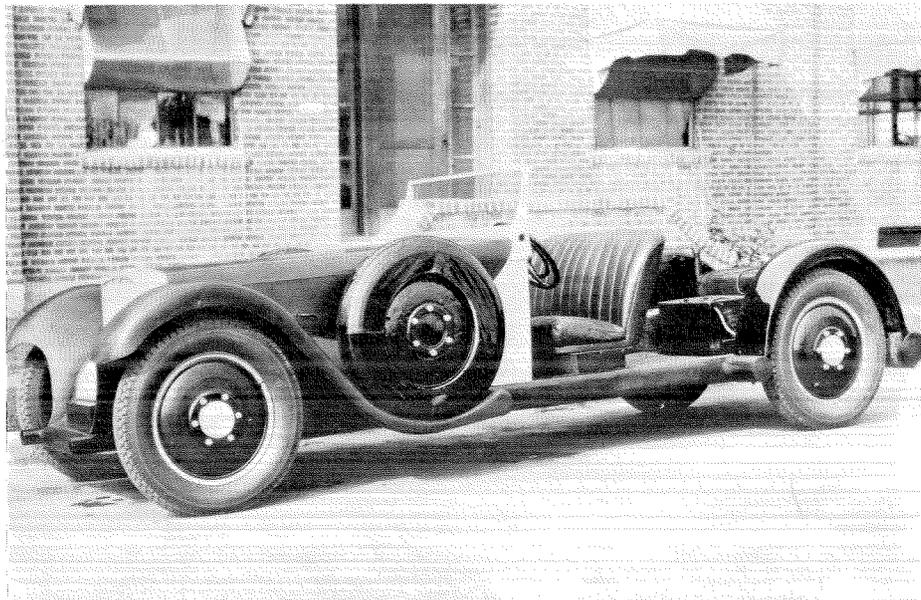
I think your readers are entitled to have my version of the Howard Hughes steam car. It is all in my book *Howard, The Amazing Mr. Hughes* and I can substantiate every statement I made.

Dr. Milikan may not have known Burns and Lewis, but it was through his good offices that they were put in contact with Hughes. Daugherty, in his article in your March-April 1972 issue doesn't deny that Dr. Milikan was the president of Caltech in 1925 or that Hughes was in contact with him. The initial call was from Howard to Dr. Milikan and I was present when he made the call.

Howard acquired both the Stanley Steamer and a Doble after his father's death in 1924. He did not lose interest in the Burns & Lewis project until the prototype was completed. It was built on the chassis of a French car with individual wheel suspension and a tubular frame. Hughes and I inspected the completed car just as I described it in my book. Burns & Lewis were both there and Burns can verify this.

Burns & Lewis were not "switched to work on the thief proof lock" as Daugherty indicated. They were transferred to the film coloring process at Multicolor, Ltd. Contrary to Daugherty, the manager was not Lewis but A. A. MacDonald who was transferred from Hughes Tool Co. When Multicolor went into bankruptcy Burns and Lewis both left Hughes' employ. They did not "jump from project to project" in the Hughes empire. During the period they worked on the steam car they also worked on a wire recording system but not after the car was junked.

NOAH DIETRICH



Bruce Burns, '19, and Howard Lewis, '23, completed this version of the Hughes Steamer in late 1929. Contrary to published reports, the car is not "one big radiator" with condenser tubes through everything, including the doors. On this version, driven by Hughes, there were no doors and the entire power plant was forward of the firewall.